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# Yemen

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### Recommended Citation

Carapico, Sheila. "Yemen." In *Dispatches from the Arab Spring: Understanding the New Middle East*, edited by Paul Amar and Vijay Prashad, 101-121. New Delhi, India: LeftWord Books, 2013.

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# Yemen

SHEILA CARAPICO

IN FEBRUARY 2011, Tawakkol Karman stood on a stage outside Sanaa University. A microphone in one hand and the other clenched defiantly above her head, reading from a list of demands, she led tens of thousands of cheering, flag-waving demonstrators in calls for peaceful political change. She was to become not so much the leader as the figurehead of Yemen's uprising. On other days and in other cities, other citizens led the chants: men and women and sometimes, for effect, little children. These mass public performances enacted a veritable civic revolution in a poverty-stricken country where previous activist surges never produced democratic transitions but nonetheless did shape national history. Drawing on the Tunisian and Egyptian inspirations as well as homegrown protest legacies, in 2011 Yemenis occupied the national commons as never before. Whether or not their aspirations would be met, the country's youth—who are the demographic majority—had animated a public civic renaissance. Women's very public participation was one powerful signifier of seismic sociocultural change.

Youthful pro-democracy activists, gray-haired socialists, YouTube videos, gun-toting cowboys, Northern carpetbaggers, mutinous army officers, Shia insurgents, kids wearing face paint, tear gas canisters, WikiLeaks cables, performance arts, foreign-born jihadists, dissident tribal sheikhs, and a female Nobel Peace Prize laureate: Yemen's upris-

ing combined slogans and motifs from the Egyptian and Tunisian revolts with elements of repression emulating Libya and Syria and quintessentially colloquial practices in a gaudy, fast-paced, multilayered revolutionary theater verging on the macabre. The most important trajectory was that day after day, with special energy on Sabbath Fridays, in cities and towns across the land, men, women, and children agitated against dictatorship and the politics of violence. Whether this popular intifada—wracked by intra-elite street battles and complicated by American operations against the local branch of al-Qaeda—would end in glory or tragedy, its social, psychological, and political significance was inestimable. Regardless of the near-term outcome, as in Tunisia and Egypt, the experience of collective contentious mobilization “from below” in solidarity with fellow Yemenis and other Arabs had been transformative for young women and men. They had tasted the power of social mobilization.

The 2011 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded jointly to two Liberian women who helped pull their country out of the abyss of cruel and brutal civil war and to a Yemeni spokesperson for her country’s human rights constituency. Nominated in January 2011 shortly after her release from temporary detention and honored by the committee in Oslo for representing the popular outcry for liberty and justice across the whole Arab region, Tawakkol Karman dedicated her prize to all Arab demonstrators and martyrs during the year’s revolutionary upheavals. “I am so happy,” she told the *New York Times*, “and I give this award to all of the youth and all of the women across the Arab world, in Egypt, in Tunisia” (quoted in Cowell, Kasinof, and Nossiter 2011).

When the prize was announced October 7, Yemen’s “peaceful youth” (shabab al-silmiyya) had been in the streets daily for eight months demanding an end to a three-decades-old dictatorship. With their turnout multiplied by their endurance, Yemenis had clocked more demonstrator-days in 2011 than more populous countries such as Egypt. They had practiced novel public modes of expression, combining indigenous arts such as oral poetry recitation, local dances, and public prayer with novel technological applications that allowed them to blog and post and tweet. They rejoiced and uploaded celebratory messages to the Internet upon hearing the news from Oslo. Defying the return volley

of rockets and tear gas, protesters called for an international tribunal to bring President Ali Abdullah Saleh and his cronies to justice.

The uprising that began in January in “Change Square,” Midan al-Taghayr, near Sanaa University was part of the broader Arab revolution yet also organically associated with Yemeni culture and political history. Yemenis adopted North African slogans, “Irhal” and “Isqat al-nizam,” calling for the departure of the president and the rest of his regime (Rosen 2001). As in Egypt, there was advance planning for a first day of protests, but the outpouring and momentum from below soon surpassed the wildest dreams of would-be organizers. Bypassing the organized formal elite partisan opposition of the Joint Meeting Parties, youth congregated in ever-increasing numbers to air their frustrations. In contrast with metropolitan Cairo’s central Liberation Square—Midan al-Tahrir—where fantastically photogenic multitudes were filmed from nearby balconies of high-rise hotels by international television crews, Yemen’s marches, like its twenty-some million inhabitants, were relatively more dispersed among a half dozen major cities and several smaller towns. Millions strong, they drew much less worldwide media attention than any of the other major upheavals of the “Arab Spring”: those in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria.

Yet via phone, Arabic-language satellite television, and the World Wide Web they were very much in touch with what was going on elsewhere in the region. Interestingly, unlike in Egypt where to some it seemed that Facebook and the Internet sparked the revolution, in Yemen Facebook membership, blogs, and YouTube posts proliferated from mere handfuls of elites with friends abroad in late 2010 to major means of communications a year later. It was a cyberexplosion. Thousands of Yemenis joined Facebook during the spring of 2011, others created Facebook pages, still more blogged in Arabic or English or other languages, hundreds practiced guerrilla photojournalism. Virtual participants among Yemeni emigrant communities overseas passed images on, and some were picked up by Al Jazeera or analyzed from abroad. As in Egypt, however, for all the talk of a digital revolution, mobile phones were by far the most salient form of technology for domestic communication, and word of mouth spread news within and between neighborhoods.

Discontent in the poorest Arab country had been simmering for years on a number of fronts and levels. Patronage was rampant (Alley 2010), and restlessness stirred around the president's clear intention to ordain his son, already commander of the nation's Republican Guard, as his successor. Added to this were the postponement of parliamentary elections; widespread unemployment, especially among the youth; deteriorating standards of living for all but the upper echelons of the ruling kleptocracy; ecological depredations to a formerly self-sufficient farm economy; a consequentially decimated ecology and acute water shortages; abysmal educational and medical facilities, sanitation, and physical infrastructure; crude resort to censorship, harassment, arbitrary detention, and brutality against journalists, dissidents, and regime opponents; and profound, widespread malaise.

By late 2010 regional demonstrations or uprisings had cropped up in different parts of the country with seemingly different complaints. Most dramatically, governorates in what had been the South Yemeni territory known as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen until 1990 formed a movement (known simply as al-Hirak) for secession. Agitators had been marching and staging displays in the Indian Ocean port city of Aden and outlying provinces such as Hadramawt and Abyan for several years.

Although Southerners rightly felt particular discrimination, things were not well either in the former North Yemen, where Saleh had ruled since the assassination of his predecessor in 1978. There was a more openly armed rebellion rooted in complicated, sometimes counterintuitive sectarian and tribal frictions around villages and valleys in the far northern province of Sa'adah, seemingly exacerbated by proximity to the Saudi border (Weir 1997).

In cities and provinces between these geographical extremes, people were disheartened by high-level corruption, graft, nepotism, and favoritism toward the president's Hashid tribal confederation, including high-ranking military officers. Often, resentments were highly localized: as we will see below, rival tribes and inhabitants of the Red Sea coast and merchants and farmers from the "middle regions" all expressed particular regional and communal concerns.

Yet, remarkably, over the course of 2011, protests coalesced around a national, pro-democracy, reformist consciousness. To grasp this astonishing episode of mass civic engagement, it is useful to review earlier waves of activism and the ways they constituted national and local public civic realms. From the mid-twentieth century onward, each generation enjoyed a moment of civic efflorescence: the independence movement in the Crown Colony of Aden and the South Arabian Protectorates in the 1950s and 1960s, self-help community betterment projects primarily in North Yemen in the 1970s and 1980s, and a vibrant if short-lived democratic opening after unification of the two parts of the country in the 1990s. The civic outburst of 2011, the fourth such opening, drew on earlier experiences but also shared many elements with what became known in English as the Arab Spring.

### **Activist Surges and Public Spheres**

Civil society is usually thought of as a zone of voluntarism, philanthropy, and public-spirited discourse beyond the affective bonds of family, distinguishable from entrepreneurial ventures and outside the formal apparatus of the state. Most theories of peaceful democratic transitions hold that a vibrant civic associational network and a lively public intellectual sphere of civility are the sine qua non for the development of liberal democracy. It is sometimes argued that formal, modern, liberal, intellectually informed associations often dubbed NGOs (for “nongovernmental organizations”) are the necessary precondition for meaningful political reform, or, on the other hand, that civil society cannot exist except under constitutional, elected governments. By these criteria many scholars and pundits, Arab as well as Western, often doubted whether it was possible to speak of civil society anywhere in the region, much less in quaint and colorful but underdeveloped Yemen. Certainly the government of Ali Abdullah Saleh, like other Arab dictatorships, had worked nonstop to curtail, co-opt, and contain civil society within government-dominated institutions or ruling-party bureaucracies. Yet looking at Egypt, Yemen, and other countries’ subaltern social movements even before these uprisings, we had recognized that when

circumstances demand, civil society can enable communities to cope with physical or political adversity, to navigate bureaucratic obstacles, and even to challenge authoritarianism. Moreover, although successful mass movements had been rare, we knew that in the Arab region as a whole and in Yemen in particular, when legal avenues for complaint and lobbying are exhausted and conditions become intolerable, there are exceptional, take-to-the-streets civic moments of mass engagement, whether organized or spontaneous (Carapico 2010).

Civic activism is a variable, then, not a cultural constant. It consists not only of formal organizations but also of various ways people exercise collective agency. Shaped by sociocultural, economic, and political-legal circumstances as well as trends in the Arab and international arenas, civil society in Yemen has expanded and contracted and varied in shape and content in radically context-dependent ways during the past half century or so. Prior to the 2011 upheaval, the older generation recalled three distinct and distinctive expansions of civic activity in different times, places, and circumstances. Note in advance that none of them had a democratic outcome. Actually, they all ended with a kind of dialectical boomerang effect: closure of public civic space by “states” that drew legitimacy from the same popular energies they subsequently sought to repress. While progress toward democracy or even modernity was halting and faltering, each time people took matters into their own hands, they left an indelible legacy on national politics, governance, and society.

The first great Yemeni civic opening occurred in what were then Aden Colony and the Protectorates of South Arabia during the late colonial era in the 1950s and 1960s. The South Yemeni independence movement, in its civilian manifestations as well as in the armed resistance, was part of a larger Third World struggle for national self-determination and an Arabian flowering of political, artistic, and civic expression, much of it class based (Halliday 1974). Unionized labor stoppages, mass street marches, the distribution of political pamphlets and newspapers, hunger strikes, the founding of Yemen’s first feminist organizations, and other arguably imported actions, especially among the polyglot workers in Aden port, combined with creative political performances drawing on religious or tribal traditions in small towns in the Hadramawt and Lahj.

This remarkable populist outburst, culminating under complicated circumstances in the departure of British administrators from Aden and points east in late 1967, did not survive the independence era. A brief Thermidor was followed by a reign of terror. As in so many other countries, from Cuba to Algeria to Vietnam, hard-fought postcolonial independence enabled a revolutionary ruling party, the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), to nationalize and centralize all forms of participation into national federations for labor, women, journalists, intellectuals, and other corporate groups. Under the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), women enjoyed rights unparalleled in the Arabian Peninsula if not the whole Arab world: polygamy was outlawed, for instance. Other progressive social policies were pursued. Yet postrevolutionary fervor amalgamated mass mobilization to the party-state project. Civil society retreated underground or fled into North Yemen. The last vestiges of the populist movement that brought it to power were eviscerated in a bloody two-week shoot-out among the Socialist Party elite in 1986.

The second civic renaissance occurred mostly in North Yemen after the downfall of the thousand-year-old Zaydi imamate in 1962 and the establishment of a weak republican government, when communities undertook their own modernization with only minimal assistance from the ostensibly central state. Unlike the South, the Republic of Yemen had no colonial history to speak of and was extraordinarily backward (Halliday 1974). There were hardly any paved roads, public schools, or municipal power and water supplies. Combining a forward-looking urge with native urban management and communal practices including tribal customs, cities and regions built thousands of kilometers of roads and hundreds of primary and middle schools, and rigged up scores of water delivery and electrical power stations. Most of these activities were ad hoc; committees organized around a project often dissolved after its completion. On the other hand, in some localities, especially the Ta'izz region, elections were held for local development boards to manage these projects.

Ironically, decentralized grassroots community betterment projects laid the infrastructural ground for the relative centralization of state power that took place when Ali Abdullah Saleh came to office in the



late 1970s, as transportation access and educational curricula connected other urban areas and even remote provinces more tightly to Sanaa. Roads brought goods, strangers, and officials into the provinces, for instance, while schools utilized texts from the embryonic Ministry of Education and taught the national anthem. Ultimately the fledgling military government was able to centralize social capital through bureaucratic controls and to claim credit for every classroom constructed with local resources. The national confederation of local development associations morphed into the Ministry of Local Administration (Carapico 1998). Entirely different in style and substance from the South's struggle for independence, the services-oriented direct-action "cooperative movement" also left its mark on Yemeni political history and socioeconomic development.

Yemen's third major civic opening heralded unification between the PDRY and North Yemen in 1990 according to a deal between Saleh and the remaining Socialist leaders of the PDRY. Stuck at the very end of the Cold War, this arrangement coincided with German unification. Unity introduced a panoply of political parties, including the YSP; Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC); a conservative Northern party called al-Islah, close to the GPC and led by prominent Hashid and Islamist figures; and several smaller Nasserist, Baathist, and Shia parties. All had their own newspapers and agendas, and all fielded candidates in reasonably free and fair elections in 1993. When the two former ruling parties that still commanded the respective armed forces of the two Yemens refused to abide by the power-sharing mandate of the elections, however, armed conflict seemed imminent. The two armies squared off. The Aden-based leadership of the Socialist Party and former PDRY army launched a bid for secession.

Intellectual elites and ordinary people swung into action with mass public conferences in urban and tribal areas alike, with small but significant nationwide peace protests, and with a National Dialogue of Political Forces that produced a constitution-like "contract of accord" to resolve the impasse short of armed combat (Carapico 1998). The forces of peace and reconciliation lost. In the two-month, army-to-army military campaign that followed, Saleh's forces, buttressed by

self-declared antisocialist jihadis, conquered the old South and chased the YSP leaders into exile.

Over the next decade and more, the victorious Saleh administration gradually tightened the vise on public civic expression. Elections were increasingly engineered to ensure victory for the president and his party faithful. Aspiring to but never quite mastering the absolute security control achieved in Syria or Libya, Saleh's administration left some room for an impotent opposition coalition comprising the unlikely bedfellows of al-Islah, the Socialists, the assorted Arab nationalists, and small indigenous parties. Known as the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), this opposition coalition was able to register a modicum of minority parliamentary dissent. Popular social forces were nearly, but never entirely, quelled.

Under these circumstances of only a ceremonial facade of democracy, people were still able to claim pieces of the public civic sphere in quotidian ways independent of state-sponsored spectacles of nationhood. In Yemen one of these is the ubiquitous practice of gathering in private homes to chew *qat* and talk politics in the afternoons, as well as participate in oral recitations of poetry. In the more explicitly public national sphere, expensive pageants such as the celebratory fanfare devoted to the bogus reelection of President Saleh were no more constitutive of what it means to be Yemeni than the moral panic surrounding macabre incidents such as a series of murders in the Sanaa morgue (Wedeen 2008). In other words, shared reactions to extraordinary events as well as shared everyday practices can constitute the Yemeni "self" as an explicitly national or even democratic person, and this sense of national identity can be constituted even in the absence of actualization through state institutions (Wedeen 2008, 15). A fairly vibrant if distinctly male-dominated public civic sphere survived.

The antiregime protests of 2011—and to some extent, perhaps counterintuitively, even the pro-Saleh demonstrations staged in the military reviewing stand near his presidential palace throughout the year—echoed these precedents in distinct though varied ways. In particular, major regions and cities drew on local customs in ways that imagined and expressed national aspirations and the collective will of "the people." To explain this point it is necessary to map the social

geography of the pro-democracy movement. The protests transcended all the preexisting divisions of North versus South, urban versus tribal, Sanaa versus the hinterland, Shafa'i Sunni versus Shia Zaydi, uplands versus lowlands, political party loyalties, and conventional gender roles.

## **Geographies of Protest**

A peaceful intifada had already been in motion since the summer of 2007 in the South, the territory known as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen and ruled by the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) from late 1967 to 1990. In 1990, the South unified with the North, already ruled by Saleh; it attempted secession four years later. During the short civil war, the president called in assorted tribal militias and "Afghan Arabs"—puritanical Salafis ostensibly returned from the victorious anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan—to assist the regular army under the command of General Ali Muhsin. A beer factory and civil service administration offices in the Southern capital of Aden were torched and looted. Eventually the erstwhile Southern leadership fled by boat to Oman, and Northern military officers and gangs of scalawags installed themselves as governors, administrators, and landowners. Workers deprived of their jobs, pensioners denied their benefits, and women stripped of the rights they had enjoyed under the old Socialist administration seethed under what they regarded as occupation. Oil revenues from wells on what had been Southern soil flowed into the coffers of Saleh and his cronies (Day 2008).

After more than a decade of economic collapse and political repression, the youth and some of the old YSP cadres launched al-Hirak, a movement motivated largely by resurgent Southern nationalism (Dahlgren 2010). It drew on some of the slogans, motifs, and performative elements of the anticolonial movement in Aden, the cities of the Hadramawt, and other communities. Again these included both Socialist elements and locally distinctive traditions of dance, dress, and dialect. The movement also depended on human rights organizations and municipal newspapers established during the opening that followed unification in the early 1990s. By late 2010, Saleh and his official media could successfully portray their distress as treasonous irredentist threats to national

unity reminiscent of the 1994 civil war. And indeed throughout 2011 some citizens flew the flag of the old People's Republic, even as others joined the nationalist movement to oust the regime in Sanaa.

Whether or not they harbored genuinely separatist ambitions, residents of the former PDRY had good reason to feel they were punitively targeted and deprived of basic liberties and entitlements. What was not evident to them until after the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt began was the extent of popular resentments and yearnings in the rest of the country.

It turned out that many of the tribulations in the South resonated in every province of the republic: the grotesque enrichment of regime cronies at the expense of the multitudes, obscenely bad stewardship of the commons, the skyrocketing prices of meat, staples, and even clean water; the lack of jobs for college and high school graduates. Already by 2005 the American ambassador had noted in a WikiLeaks cable that riots prompted by the lifting of fuel subsidies had stimulated the prospects for a revolt, especially—but not only—among the perennially restive tribes of the northeastern provinces of al-Jawf and Marib, where truckers and pump farmers considered cheap fuel their lifeblood (Carapico 2011). Grandiose pageants of presidential power, half-truths in the official media, the indignities of military checkpoints, arbitrary arrests and imprisonments—these and other daily insults fed popular alienation, despair, and frustration, most notably among the youth. While a privileged few cooled off in swimming pools in their luxury compounds, the water table fell, decimating the farm economy that remained the livelihood of the rural majority. Farmers and ranchers facing starvation flocked to the cities, where water supplies and social services were swamped. Misery became the new normal; millions barely survived on the equivalent of a dollar or two a day. The economy was in shambles (Colton 2010).

The breakthrough came in Sanaa, the capital, a metropolitan area on the high central plateau whose population had quadrupled during the previous generation owing to the lures of government jobs, services, and payoffs. It was now a teeming, sprawling, poorly laid out, still picturesque low-rise city of nearly two million inhabitants, more than half of whom were under twenty years of age. Its schools, sewage disposal

system, and water supplies were completely overwhelmed. Nominally both home and center to the ruling family and its security apparatus, Sanaa was also most exposed to its excesses and regulations and the prime site for parades of presidential power.

Early in 2011 Saleh loyalists laid claim to Sanaa's central Midan al-Tahrir so that it would not follow Cairo's example of becoming a stage for malcontents. Also the huge presidential, military, and ministerial complexes remained showplaces for Saleh photographs. Drawing from the precedents of the 1993–94 antiwar, pro-democracy demonstrations, therefore, students, faculty, and other activists assembled around the university campus on the western edge of the old part of Sanaa. They named the space they claimed Change Square (Midan al-Taghayr). Proportionately, the occupiers represented the demographic bulge of fifteen- to thirty-year-olds who had never known another leadership: university students, graduates, dropouts, and wannabes grasping for hope for a better future. In Change Square and adjoining spaces, these “peaceful youth” enlivened the experience with music, dancing, poetry readings, posters, street art, and collective gestures of defiance, such as fifty thousand pairs of clasped hands held high. The call to prayer became a call to civic engagement, and mass prayers became a form of civil disobedience.

Inspired by Karman, who headed the NGO Women Journalists Without Chains, women defied a conservative cultural norm about speaking softly in public. They mocked the president's sleazy innuendo about an un-Islamic “mixing of the sexes” in Change Square. Almost all women in Sanaa wear the all-encompassing black *sharshaf*, which is a modern veil. At one point many thousands lined up, covered in the customary black. Some rows wore white baseball caps on top of their veils. Another group sported red baseball caps. Visually, the effect was to create a white, black, and red Yemeni flag stretching more than a kilometer down a wide road in a show of patriotism.

The crowds around Sanaa University swelled as tribesmen—the ranchers, truckers, and farmers from outlying areas—joined the protests. Many of them pitched tents that eventually grew into a sprawling encampment snaking through the neighborhood around the university campus with its own sanitation system, medical services, teach-ins,

and food and water supplies. On March 18, plainclothes snipers fired from neighboring rooftops onto Change Square, killing more than fifty mostly youthful and entirely peaceful protesters. In disbelief, fury, and sorrow, a record 150,000 marched in Sanaa's biggest "day of rage" so far (Carapico 2011). An avalanche of top-level and midlevel resignations from the armed forces, the foreign service, the civil service, and even the president's General People's Congress followed in protest of the excessive use of force against unarmed civilians. Among the defectors were General Ali Muhsin, the commander of the First Army Brigade who had dealt mercilessly with Southern secessionists in 1994, and key leaders of the president's own Hashid tribal confederation, including scions of the paramount sheikhship, the al-Ahmar family (for background on this division, see Phillips 2006). These defections from the president's inner circle split the regime and would eventually divide the capital city into pro- and anti-Saleh territory. At the same time, collective rage and moral panic gradually solidified the protests into a nationwide movement. Sentiments crossed party lines: although they belonged to the same conservative political party, al-Islah, Karman and the al-Ahmar brothers were on very different political wavelengths (for background, see Yadav 2010).

In provincial cities where hundreds or thousands had attended rallies, multitudes now laid claim to public spaces. In Ta'izz, a bustling commercial and industrial city of more than half a million people nestled in the verdant southern mountains of the former North, and in the picturesque neighboring city of Ibb, simmering discontent erupted. The populous Ta'izz-Ibb area, known as the "middle regions," a once rich agricultural zone tilled by peasants and sharecroppers, served as a bridge between the Southern al-Hirak and the revolutionary movement centered in Sanaa. People traveled, telephoned, and tweeted with family and compatriots in Aden, Hadramawt, Abyan, and other parts of the former PDRY already in foment. By summer, reporters were calling Ta'izz—a hub for exiled anti-imperialist Southern forces during the 1960s and a center of the cooperative movement in the 1970s—the epicenter of the democratic intifada. The city's relatively educated, cosmopolitan student body choreographed a nearly carnival atmosphere with music, skits, caricatures, graffiti, banners, and other artistic embel-

ishments. Photos showed throngs massed in dozens of thousands. As in Aden and Sanaa, women and girls frequently organized separate marches and displays to underscore the unarmed, modern character of the revolt. On October 30, 2011, for instance, they posted a YouTube video full of flowers, confetti, balloons, music, and ululating commemorating each of their martyrs by name and portrait. Meanwhile, perhaps even more than Sanaa, Ta'izz became a battlefield between pro- and antiregime security forces.

In Hudayda, the steamy, squalid Red Sea port that is the hub of the Tihama coastal plain where Afro-Yemenis suffer the country's highest rates of poverty and political disenfranchisement, youth and parents also filled their own Freedom Square with banners and chants and insurrectionary graffiti. "Irhal!" they yelled in unison: Go! And, referring to the deposed Tunisian leader who sought refuge in Saudi Arabia: "Oh, Ali Abdullah, join Bin Ali in Riyadh!" First they applauded Mubarak's resignation. Many months later, like their compatriots in the highlands, they celebrated the demise of Libya's dictator Muammar Qaddafi and dedicated mass prayers to the martyrs of Syria. New mantras, skits, and cartoons taunted both the Yemeni and the Syrian dictators: "Come on Ali, come on Bashar, it's time for you to go!" ran the refrain.

Raucous demonstrations mixed with familiar acts of civil disobedience such as road blockages and commercial stoppages in the wide-open, semiarid, sparsely populated plateaus and mountains north, northwest, east, and somewhat south of Sanaa, regions analogous to Texas or Wyoming, the avowed tribal heartland where ranchers, cowboys, truck farmers, and hillbillies carry Kalashnikovs or even bazooka launchers and perennially harbor deep mistrust of the central government. These demonstrations were especially prevalent in al-Jawf and Marib governorates, stretches of the north and east populated predominantly by members of the Bakil tribal confederation, the rival to Hashid. More reminiscent of the 1993–94 mass conferences than of the familiar low-grade armed resistance, kidnappings, and sabotage, these protests adopted the *silmiyya* approach. In al-Baydha, the small provincial capital of a heavily armed Bakil territory somewhat north of the former inter-Yemeni border, men who normally do not leave home without a rifle threw down their guns to march peacefully. This was

highly significant: in a country known to be awash in personal weapons, the mass uprising avoided guerrilla warfare or military insurrection. To repeat: tens of thousands of tribesmen with the means to launch an armed revolt resisted the temptation to open fire.

### Counterrevolutionary Forces

The response to the peaceful protests was wrathful. Divisions loyal to the president, mostly commanded by immediate members of his family, fired on unarmed demonstrators in Sanaa, Aden, Ta'izz, Hudayda, and elsewhere. Hundreds of deaths stoked rather than quelled the protests, however. Grainy, graphic cell phone footage was uploaded to the Internet. In each community, every funeral provoked more angry or grief-stricken dissenters to call for the downfall of the regime.

More explosively, loyalists and dissidents engaged one another in mortal combat, especially in certain neighborhoods of Sanaa. The bloodiest battles pitted Saleh's family commands, including the Republican Guard and special forces, against the renegade brigade led by General Ali Muhsin and the Hashid tribal militia headed by the sons of the late great Sheikh Abdallah al-Ahmar, who had been part of the Saleh regime for three decades. In other words, powerful elements of the president's inner circle representing key military and Hashid constituencies, long considered his base of support, had turned against him. At various times Saleh labeled them bloodthirsty, seditious traitors, coup makers, terrorists, and thugs. General Ali Muhsin placed an armed cordon around the large neighborhood surrounding Change Square to protect the protesters. There were frequent skirmishes around the al-Ahmar family compound on the airport road. The June explosion inside the mosque in the presidential palace compound, which left Saleh disfigured while killing or crippling several of his deputies, was almost certainly some kind of inside job (Phillips 2011). This was an intraregime squabble. The "peaceful youth" emphatically did not line up behind the general or the sons of the old sheikh, al-Ahmar.

The Saleh regime also repeated a tactic from 1994 in deliberately unleashing zealous militants, nowadays associated with al-Qaeda, against dissidents in parts of the old PDRY, especially Abyan and its



provincial capital, Zinjibar. Not more than a couple hundred fighters, many of them foreign, took advantage of the precipitous withdrawal of army and security units to overrun civilian officials in several towns. This subplot in the overall story of the Yemeni revolution dovetailed strangely with American counterterrorism operations targeting al-Qaeda figures inside Yemen, including the U.S.-born Anwar al-Awlaqi and his son, killed separately in their tribal homeland farther east in Shabwa province. Close coordination between American and Yemeni security officers in this field of operations allowed President Saleh to present himself as a reliable ally for the United States and Saudi Arabia against militant Islamists.

The hegemon of the Peninsula, Saudi Arabia, played a high-profile yet rather inscrutable and seemingly ambivalent role, coaxing its long-time ally to sign an agreement to transfer power but failing to press for a cease-fire. In May, Saudi Arabia and the other oil monarchies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), working with the Yemeni opposition in the Joint Meeting Parties, announced a plan whereby Saleh would relinquish presidential power in exchange for immunity from prosecution for himself and his family. Saleh stalled and negotiated, three times promising and then refusing to sign the same document on the grounds, he said, that it was an invitation to hand power to the mutinous factions of the military. The United States and other Western powers joined the GCC in rhetorically supporting this vague agreement (the precise text of which was never released).

The moment for Saleh's departure from office seemed to come in June, when he was airlifted to a top-of-the-line hospital in Saudi Arabia for emergency surgeries and then convalescence following the explosion inside the presidential compound. It was widely assumed that the Saudi government, a major donor to Yemen and specifically to the regime, would be both willing and able to prevent his return (Haykel 2011). In Saleh's absence, however, his son and nephews took aim at their allies turned rivals. Military and civilian deaths mounted, electricity and fuel supplies waned, and life in the cities became even more intolerable. More than three months later, on September 23, suddenly and somewhat mysteriously, the president returned to Sanaa, still insisting that he would relinquish power only after his government had organized tran-

sitional elections. Not entirely unlike the bloodletting that took place among Socialist leaders in 1986 in Aden, intra-elite gun battles raged in Sanaa and Ta'izz throughout October and into November.

Yet the international community did not press for a cease-fire or threaten sanctions against the Saleh regime. As another prominent female activist, Hooria Mashhour, tweeted on September 21, "We were expecting a stronger attitude from the GCC countries towards the crimes committed against the Yemeni people, but we get extremely disappointed to see the meeting between [Saudi] king Abdullah and Saleh." A month later, on October 21, the Security Council of the United Nations issued an ambiguous, toothless resolution condemning human rights violations by "the government and other actors" and calling for all sides to commit to a peaceful transition of power in accordance with the GCC formula. If the reactions were any indication, Resolution 2014 favored the incumbent's position over the protesters' demands. Yemen's official press agency, Saba, enthused that Saleh "welcomed" what it phrased as "support for the Presidential decree of 12 September which is designed to find a political agreement acceptable to all parties, and to ensure a peaceful and democratic transition of power, including the holding of early Presidential elections" (Saba News 2011). Writing for the protesters, Tawakkol Karman (2011) opened an op-ed in the *Guardian* on November 1 with the words "Yemenis are ready to pay the ultimate price to take on a brutal dictator. Yet the UN can't even bring itself to condemn him."

With arms raised, multitudes bewailed escalating violence and petitioned the international community to intercede diplomatically. After a series of attacks on female activists by security forces, urban women in Sanaa, still wearing their customary *sharshaf*, staged a particularly Yemeni form of protest drawing on rural traditions: they set fire to a pile of old-fashioned bedspread-like veils called *makrama*, sending a symbolic distress signal to the tribes. Their pamphlets read: "This is a plea from the free women of Yemen; here we burn our *makrama* in front of the world to witness the bloody massacres carried out by the tyrant Saleh." Marchers in al-Baydha, Ibb, and other cities and towns cried for Saleh's prosecution in an international court. Demonstrators in Sanaa and Ta'izz adopted the slogans "Remaining peaceful is our choice" and

“Peaceful, peaceful, no to civil war.” “The Yemenis’ voice is one,” they shouted in November, “we will bring corrupt Saleh to justice.”

At a ceremony on November 23 in Riyadh, the Saudi capital, witnessed by Gulf royalty and Western diplomats, a smiling Saleh finally affixed his signature to four copies of the so-called GCC deal. There was no celebration whatsoever, because few Yemenis trusted either the deal or his signature. The following day, back in the presidential palace, still acting as head of state, he declared an “amnesty” for those who had committed “errors” while vowing to prosecute perpetrators of “crimes” against his person and his administration. Karman, who was on a world-wide speaking tour, charmed audiences, but the specifics of her message went unheeded. Blood continued to flow, particularly in the streets of Ta’izz, while the international community scarcely raised an eyebrow.

## Conclusions

The 2011 uprising built on the social capital from earlier civic moments in Yemeni history: the Third World cries for independence of the now-aging 1960s generation, the cravings for modern services and education of the 1970s, and the pro-democracy patriotic sentiments of the early 1990s. Just as each of these very different mobilizations left its legacy, so too would this one. Even should it prove to have been relatively short-lived, this fourth civic opening had been the widest and the most inclusive part of an earth-shattering pan-Arab movement for change.

The uprising will have shaped the national civic consciousness of today’s youth for decades to come. The new civic awareness of the Yemeni public was fed by much more than electoral pageantry or moral repugnance at murders in the morgue, displays of intraregime violence and excessive force against demonstrators, or the spuriously bizarre policies of Yemen’s international patrons. Moreover, anyone who has participated in mass public events—the American civil rights, antiwar, or Occupy Wall Street demonstrations, for instance, or even highly competitive football matches in huge stadiums—knows how electrifying it is to be part of a crowd cheering or booing in unison. The Nobel Prize that enabled one eloquent and forceful, but rather ordinary, spokeswoman to appeal to the United Nations and the world for action

further nurtured patriotic pride and shored up the hopes of protesters persevering against long odds.

The near-term outcome probably will be neither full-scale revolution nor a smooth transition. Before all this happened, intelligence analysts considered Yemen unstable and possibly hovering on the edge of state failure. The next phase might be cruel, messy, or both. The country could split along North-South lines or other fractures. Communities could resort to armed resistance. Saleh and his sons and nephews seemed to prefer civil war or anarchy to stepping down; and General Ali Muhsin, the al-Ahmar brothers, a few other conventional actors, and small bands of al-Qaeda-type militants had joined in battle. After the gruesome death of the Libyan dictator heightened public determination for the demise of both Ali Abdullah Saleh and Syria's Bashar al-Assad, Saleh's gunmen cracked down harder on civilian protesters and prepared to wage all-out war with military defectors. Jihadist infiltrators from Saudi Arabia seemed to be provoking conflict in Sa'adah province. After the American drone strikes that killed the al-Awlaqis, the risk that either a terrorist attack or counterterrorism operations would ignite fighting on new fronts could not be discounted. Uncounted dangers lay on the road ahead, with little sign of diplomatic intervention from the United Nations, the United States, the Gulf Cooperation Council, or any other quarters.

Even under the worst-case scenarios, however, there had been a radical change that amounted to a civic revolution for Yemen and the whole Arab world. Never in the long history of the Arabian Peninsula had citizens acting as such constituted a body politic and assembled en masse to insist on political reform. For 2011, at least, Southern malcontents and rebels in Sa'adah found common national cause with college students in Sanaa and Ta'izz and with tribesmen from the hinterlands around ideas about social justice, nonviolence, and better governance. However divided they were between the more widespread and popular movement for change and the still not-insignificant minority who turned out for Saleh rallies, "the people" spoke out and claimed the metaphorical and physical commons.

Yemen's "peaceful youth" activists raised their voices not only as a nation but also in unison with revolutionaries elsewhere in the Arab

world. This was also a substantial development. It was not impossible in 2010 to imagine Yemen exploding with mass fury, or to foresee a “take to the streets moment” in Cairo, or to recognize the alienation of Tunisians from the Ben Ali regime. What could not be foreseen were the simultaneity, synchronization, and solidarity that arose among essentially leaderless protests from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean and beyond. A virtual Arab/Arabic-language public civic sphere expanded through cell phones and the Internet as well as through Al Jazeera and other broadcasters, until customary forms of censorship and intimidation could not contain the flow of information. It was even more remarkable that a religious thirty-two-year-old mother of three in a head scarf from the most remote, poverty-stricken, socially conservative corner of the Arab world would go down in world history as the embodiment of peaceful pro-democracy agitation in the region. Finally, by the end of 2011, a variation of the somewhat anarchic, antisystemic Liberation Square sit-ins and campouts in Arab countries had spread across the globe as young people from Athens to New York and many other cities occupied physical and virtual civic spaces in a worldwide wave of protests. It was quite remarkable that several million young Yemenis, represented by one young mother, were so much in the vanguard of this global movement for local, national, and worldwide change.

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